*Rampal Singh and the cremation that (maybe) never was*
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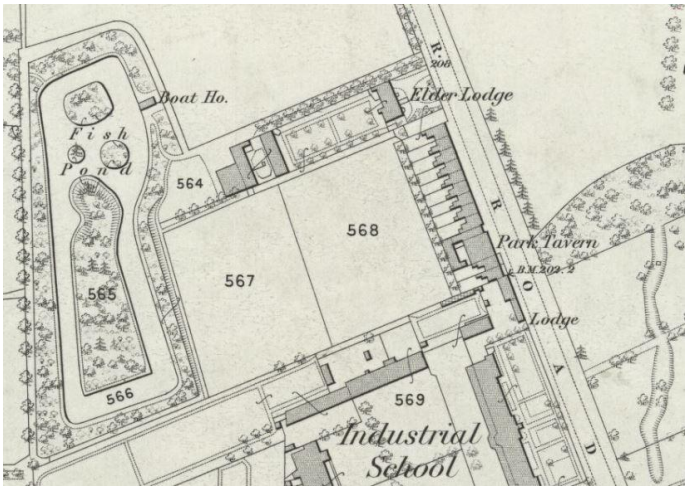
# Rampal Singh and the cremation that (maybe) never was

**by Francis Howcutt**
francishowcutt@gmail.com

*This is a revised version of an article published in the Norwood Review.*[1]

Singh was rarely found as a surname in Victorian England. Only 14 births, marriages and deaths of people with that family name were registered between the advent of civil registration in July 1837 and 1880. These events include the death of Rani Sobhao Koir Singh who was 28 years old when on 1 March 1877 she succumbed to bronchitis after 23 days of illness. She was the wife of Rampal Singh, Rajah of Rapoor, Oudh in India and expired at their home at Elder Lodge, Elder Road, which stood on land whose frontage is now occupied by housing numbered as 34 Elder Road, West Norwood, about six miles south of the centre of London.




**Elder Lodge in 1870** [2]

An article with the title '*The Rani Koir Singh (1849-1877)*' that was published in in 2007 provides a wealth of detail about the background of the Rajah and Rani and the Rajah's notable political activities in England and India.[3]

Writing prior to his own death in 1949, a local undertaker J B Wilson recounted that a record of the Ranee's funeral was in the books of his firm, elaborating:

> *'The Rajah ordered her body to be embalmed and placed in a lead coffin with a glass lid. The coffin was put in the catacombs in Norwood Cemetery, and the Rajah often came to look at it.'* [4]

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[1] *The Cremation that never was* by Francis Howcutt. *The Norwood Review* – Spring 2024.
https://www.norwoodsociety.co.uk/norwood-review/recent-editions

[2] National Library of Scotland: https://maps.nls.uk/view/103313171

[3] *The Rani Subhao Koir Singh (1849-1877)* by Colin Fenn, *Friends of West Norwood Cemetery Newsletter* No. 58, page 6.
https://fliphtml5.com/bookcase/obwznl/

[4] *The Story of Norwood* by J B Wilson (Lambeth, 1973), page 39.
This book is available from: https://www.norwoodsociety.co.uk/books-for-sale

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However, these arrangements were not the Rajah's most favoured plan. His family were Hindu and, although religious disputes were involved in his departure from India, he evidently retained a preference for cremation. This was a major problem in 1877, as there was not even one crematorium anywhere in this country. At a meeting of the Social Science Congress on 12 October 1877, Mr William Eassie (1832-1888), secretary of the Cremation Society of England, read a paper in which he complained:

> *'I was greatly ashamed some months ago, when consulted by the Rajah Rampal Singh as to the cremation of his deceased Ranee, to acknowledge that, with all our vast Indian Possessions, we did not possess the means of complying with the wish of a subject in this way.'*[5]

By the time of the 1881 census, the Rajah had left Norwood for 35 Colville Square, Chelsea where the resident staff consisted of a housekeeper and two other servants. Apart from the Rajah himself, the only person listed at the address who had been born in India was Nobee Busk, a 22-year-old manservant. Presumably, when he moved away from Norwood the Rajah's visits to the catacombs at Norwood became less frequent or were even discontinued. However, there are two routes by which it is feasible that the Rani may eventually have been cremated. Mr Eassie's address also mentioned:

> *'In a late cremation of an English subject I was obliged to ask a personal favour from a foreign medical friend, and he in turn to solicit one from his government, ere it was accomplished. I have just received permission to make use of the Milan crematorium should another occasion arise.'*

Alternatively, the Rani may have been cremated at some point after the earliest public crematorium began operation at Woking in 1885.[6]

**Rajah Rampal Singh**

[5] *Leamington Spa Courier*, 13 October 1877, page 8, column 4.
[6] *History of Modern Cremation in the United Kingdom from 1874: The First Hundred Years.* https://www.cremation.org.uk/history-of-cremation-in-the-united-kingdom#woking